

**Testimony of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut
Before the Judiciary Committee
March 5, 2014**

**IN SUPPORT OF
HB 5367 AN ACT CONCERNING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ENHANCED PROTECTIONS
AGAINST DISCRIMINATION.**

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Daniela Giordano and I am the Public Policy Director with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is the state affiliate of NAMI, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental illness. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups, educational programs, and advocacy for improved services, more humane treatment and an end to stigma and economic and social discrimination. We represent individuals who live with mental illness and parents and family members of individuals living with mental illness. I am writing to you today on behalf of NAMI Connecticut to support HB 5367 *An Act Concerning the Implementation of Enhanced Protections Against Discrimination*.

With this bill, people with a mental disability would now be covered against discrimination as a protected class. This proposal would finally afford the same protections enjoyed by people based on other characteristics such as color, race, sex or physical disability, to people living with mental health challenges.

Codified protection from discrimination based on someone's mental (dis)ability is crucial considering that people living with such challenges often experience discrimination in vital areas of life including housing, the workplace, education and health care. These acts of discrimination continue despite the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) which is designed to prohibit discrimination against people with mental disabilities, and other related laws. Discrimination can manifest in people being treated for other health concerns with unwarranted attention to the mental health diagnosis and lack of comprehensive treatment for the concern for which care was sought.¹ Employment discrimination may be demonstrated by attitudinal and structural barriers that prevent people from becoming active and equal participants in the competitive labor market.²

¹ New York Times. August 10, 2013. When Doctors Discriminate. Op Ed by Julianna Garey. Retrieved March 4, 2014 from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/11/opinion/sunday/when-doctors-discriminate.html?_r=0

² Medscape. Mental Illness and Employment Discrimination. Heather Stuart. Current Opinion in Psychiatry. 2006;19(5):522-526. Retrieved March 4, 2014 from <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/542517>

As part of this discussion, it is also important to make a distinction between stigma and discrimination. There has been a considerable amount of attention paid and resources invested in efforts to fight the stigma against mental illness, as it is often termed. No one disagrees that it is important to continue this effort to address inaccurate perceptions and dispel myths regarding people living with mental health challenges. However, what should be demanding even more of our attention and efforts are the discriminatory actions, often stemming from misinformation and myths, which negatively impact people who are already dealing with extra challenges and which in turn perpetuate the stigma.

HB 5367 gives us the long-overdue opportunity to enhance protections against discrimination in statute by including a class of people that already has to deal with oftentimes complex health challenges, to receive protection from discrimination as many other classes of people have for years.

Thank you for your time and attention. Please let us know if we can answer any questions for you.

Respectfully submitted,

Daniela Giordano, MSW
Public Policy Director
NAMI Connecticut